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THE IMAGE IN THE SEED
A CREATION OF ART FORMS THROUGH PAINTING AND DRAWING
INSPIRED BY BIOLOGICAL BEGINNINGS

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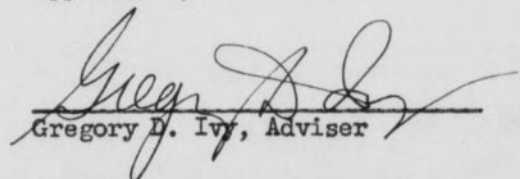
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Approved by


Gregory D. Ivy, Adviser

up from the green web the dance is born
maker and mortal press open hands through the fresh sky
thin horizons tremor with unborn day
seek now

for the image is in the seed

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PART I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is, primarily, to explain the meanings of my paintings and to relate these paintings to my philosophy.

I proposed to make an inspired interpretation through painting and drawing of biological beginnings and their abstract beauty. As a secondary project I have experimented in expanding the potentiality of the picture frame.

The value of any project should be discernible in its means as well as its ends. The idea of birth, formation, development, and configuration in nature which so few painters have explored is to me the richest field open to the painter today. Excellent studies in beginning forms have been made by philosophers, sculptors, and photographers but relatively few painters have seriously considered the area. I have found a strikingly similar investigation being carried on in photography by Professor Gyorgy Kepes. In an illustrated article which appeared in the Arts and Architecture magazine for May, 1951, a show of Mr. Kepes' photography is briefly reviewed. His book, The New Landscape, unfortunately, has not been published at this writing. The following quotation appears in the article: "The purpose of this exhibition is to present new frontiers of the visible world...the new landscape...until now hidden from the unaided human eye. The visible traces of nature's process and structures are shown not as visual documentation of scientific facts but as

rich stimulating experiences involving the whole being of the beholder."¹
 From the intimate perspective and new insights brought to us by photography and the microscope, I have taken my inspiration. My paintings concern these biological beginnings as experienced by me.

¹ Gyorgy Kepes, "The New Landscape," Arts and Architecture, LXVIII (May, 1951), 21-23.

PART II

MY PHILOSOPHY OF ART

A criteria for painting. Language, even at its best is a poor medium for the communication of the thoughts of a painter. A painter should paint, and leave the written word to the writer. There are painters who are also writers but I am not one of these and must admit to a struggle with words.

The best way for me to explain my work is to explain myself, my philosophy, and to mention a few philosophers from whose writings I have evolved my inspiration.

Foremost among these thinkers is Henri Bergson. The creativeness in man's evolution as defined by Bergson is the perfect reason for not only the existence, but the necessity of art in life. Logical and beautiful, his philosophy recognizes that there are significant forms beyond the limitations of the intellect; that creation by man is once again the highest human activity.

It seems to me that Bergson's inquiry into the ultimate reality was, by its disregard for the static philosophies of his day, almost predestined to discover a new aspect of life. It was as if the very flowing nature of his reality had mystically imparted an influence on his method of investigation, a kind of influence from the unborn. From Bergson's flexibility and freedom of procedure I took another object of inspiration. I determined to begin my own investigation with an expanded viewpoint and to work toward whatever forms my curiosity found exciting. In order to make my method

safe from the errors of narrow concentration I necessarily steered clear of even the mildest generalization. I have let my unburdened curiosity take its course.

The aim of the artist is to break through the callous wall of convention into the pure state of reality and to report the intuited encounter with the powers that be.

I have come to know a kind of intrinsic grace in natural forms which is warm and friendly. Conveying this feeling throughout my work soon became my prime objective in painting. My second most fervent hope was, then, to say it in a way that was vitally fresh.

Through my associations with nature I developed a respect for all growing things. This respect has led directly to formations of criteria which I hold as necessary for the expression of art. The human kind is given to demand explanations. Science offers many explanations, but due to the changing nature of science we are skeptical to follow so wholeheartedly as we have done in the past. For those of us who believe, like Bergson, that there is something beyond the intellect, there is need for the artist. Placing the creative man on such hallowed ground, however, gives us license to demand the best of him. The best he can do is determined by his regard for his criteria and the evaluation of his criteria is the task of each interested individual.

The artistic value of the artist's work is rooted in his sincerity. This personal honesty is his trust. Honesty dictates that he work to satisfy his urge. All his experience is reflected in his art. Contamination of an artist's work comes when he tries to use his medium to express something which is beyond its power to express. What we call social painting is actually painting in which a "cause" dominates over the art spirit.

In a sense, all painting is social painting because man is a social animal but just the same, art is nobody's champion for a "cause." Art is just not the vehicle for a crusade.

Art dwells in the high, clean air where dwell the ideals. Bad art exists in word only. It is a contradiction of terms. There is only art and that which is not art.

In The Tiger, by William Blake, the thought is suggested that evil exists in order that man shall know the good by contrast. It may be, then, that "bad art" serves to highlight by contrast, the real art. What is art? This question involves consideration of the ideals which, regardless of time and place have been present to make art great. One of my most positive convictions which has come directly from my explorations among biological forms is that every work of art must have dignity. I am so keenly aware of the need for dignity in art that I make of it a qualifying essential. Dignity inherent in painting tells of the sincerity and comprehension of the painter. Dignity sets the work of art apart from cheap display. Dignity comes into a work of art and makes it an exciting order of forms. It is dignity that conveys the idea that what the painting is saying is worth saying. The spirit of the Renaissance serves as a fine example of dignity in an artistic surge. A typical example of art without dignity (which does not deserve the name of art) is that which was produced under Nazi regime in Germany. It was the vulgar intention of using art as a propaganda tool that striped that effort of its dignity and proved that art prostituted is no longer art.

For further insights into the creative expression, a consideration of the theory of Bergson is again pertinent. There are two kinds of time. The first one, with which we are so intensely familiar, is scientific time.

The second kind of time is what Bergson calls "New Time." The most important difference between scientific and "New Time" is that scientific time does not make allowances for duration and movement. Scientific time is a cold series of divisions which the mind pictures as a dotted line through space. Bergson says that the intellect, eager to make categories, makes the mistake of analyzing time. The true nature of time, the "New Time," is in constant flux and is indivisible, "New Time" is constantly advancing to the new. All creation takes place in the latest advancing into the new. Art cannot be created in scientific time because there is nothing new in scientific time with which to create. All contacts with reality are in "New Time". The intellect becomes baffled when it tries to analyze reality. Since the contact with reality calls for an aesthetic experience, it is more valuable to man than the intellect. But, the intellect does have a proper and restricted function.

I am prone to believe that man has become so complex that he has confused Himself. With the modern devotion to science, and especially psychology, today's scholars take man too seriously. Nature is approached with all sorts of complicated preconceptions. I am in favor of the simple approach with an honest and inquiring mind. Mr. J. W. N. Sullivan is one of the few thinkers today who is concerned with the philosophic reality of nature as well as phenomenology. He has said, "Nature, it appears, knows nothing of the distinction we make between space and time, The distinction we make is, ultimately, a psychological peculiarity of ours."²

¹

J.W.N. Sullivan, The Limitations of Science (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc., 1950), p. 55.

When the layman has as aesthetic experience in art re-creation--when he contacts the real--he soon forgets what he experienced. When the artist contacts the real he brings back an image. Through his medium he describes the image and we call it art through man. Whatever it is that endowed man with the power to create also put into all nature what Bergson calls "élan vital." There is a subtle difference in the mystic power found in man and that found in natural formations other than man. In man it takes the form of an urge, whereas, in natural phenomena it is more of a response. When the urge moves man to create, both man and the urge benefit. Man reaps the reward of his creating. The urge also reaps a reward in what I shall call momentum. The urge does not exactly broaden itself nor change quantitatively, but I think that in stimulating man the urge grows brighter. Another distinct difference between the urge and the response is that the response is somewhat automatic, taking place in a regular way throughout nature.

Natural response has a direct obligation to the earth and its cycles; with these we are familiar. In winter the seed in the ground is cool and quiet. When the earth tilts certain areas toward the sun's more direct rays, the seed responds and through other parts of nature the mating time takes place. Yet within these progressing cycles there is no static pause. It is as if a master mind were directing this constant flow. In man the urge flows without regard to cycle or plan except that at times it grows brighter and at other times it grows dimmer. When it is bright in many men at the same time, we refer to the time as a "Renaissance" or "Golden Age."

The urge in man may stimulate him to creation or re-creation. Because the urge is greatest in the artist , he is capable of creating art. The

layman's participation in a work of art is nothing beyond re-creation. The aesthetic is experienced in both creation and re-creation.

If all experiences, including the aesthetic and the creative, are channeled to us through our senses, then it becomes imperative to make use of as many senses as possible in examining our subject matter. When my subject is the seed I must understand it through my senses. I must know its color and its odor and, above all, I must know its spirit and how it can change its form. This whole understanding is necessary for a true painting of a seed and this is the real beginning of a work of art. My particular subject is rich in what it affords the human senses and I have thoroughly enjoyed the luxuries set before me. This appreciation is what we refer to as being "sensitive" to nature.

With the aid of a magnifying glass I have searched among the smaller formations in nature--sea shells, flowers, and buds. With such a close view, it makes one seem to have the power to see where a flower begins, the hidden starting point, but this feeling is temporary. I was soon aware that no matter how close I looked I could catch no visible birth or blank beginning because there is none. I have found that while there are forms within forms, there is a stream of form peculiar to all nature. It is present in the growing blade of grass and in the wasting away of a shell. It is the trickery of our eyes that makes intervals in this boundless stream. Against the background of false time the eye makes stereotyped pictures of the outward life, and the inward life remains unseen. An illustrator paints the outward life. The artist paints the inward life and shows its individuality. This inward stream of life lends itself most willingly toward art expression. I once saw a motion picture of a growing young plant filmed over a period of time. The film had been

accelerated so that the plant grew before one's very eyes. I had often wished that it were possible to watch a plant in the growing movement. I noticed, however, that this rapidly growing plant, made possible by modern photography, was lacking in some quality most characteristic of plant life. At first I could not understand what had been lost in the process but, now, I think I know. Perhaps the speed at which nature changes form, being slow by man's measure, is the very explanation of its serene beauty. The tempo in movement is a characterizing element. Fast movement seems to characterize more complex form while slow movement is associated with the simpler forms. I sometimes think that in the beginning, the egg came before the chicken, and the seed before the plant, because the seed and the egg rank superior in that silent dimension we call simple beauty.

I have approached all of my subjects with a concentration upon describing the individual qualities through varying degrees of abstraction. In forming concepts of what should be stressed in painting I have borrowed from the Platonic Ideals. Universal quality is the group reference to an idea or an ideal. The obvious fact that one painting is an individual, shows that one painting can more beautifully describe the individual. Universal quality is more to be contemplated than painted. After all, it is the individual character in a painting that gives it its uniqueness, and the uniqueness is what sets one painting apart from all others. For these reasons I do not attempt to paint for the expression of universal content. The individual characteristics of a subject are manifest throughout the whole of a subject and requires careful survey and understanding by the artist. A collection of these characteristics on a picture plane may still miss the objective if something of the warmth within the artist

towards his subject is not also imparted. It has been said that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. The whole takes on an extra qualitative value upon the unification of its parts. In painting this extra "something" comes from the soul of the artist.

Universal ideas are reservoirs of inspiration for artists who interpret them through their medium. Each picture takes its inspired birth from universal realms. It is individualized and has a life of its own which lives in beauty related to the idea much as a child is related to its mother.

When the artist "gives" something of himself into a work of art, there is no vacuum left inside him for he receives something in return; an aesthetic pleasure.

I am convinced that there is purpose in the living universe and that it was not invented by man. It is true that man invented many metaphysical beings, most of which are traceable to a reaction from fear. Gods are worshipped for security; man allows his gods to exist in exchange for protection by those gods. Even in such a rational society as ours there is need for gods because there is need for security. Purpose in the universe manifests itself quite apart from the invention of man. I must admit that I, personally, need purpose and, fortunately for me, purpose already exists where man exists. The prime justification for the existence of purpose is the apparent direction of the universe. By direction I mean a governing influence rather than a predesignated path. Purpose is the only satisfactory explanation that I can find for what seems to be an advancement in the activity involved in being. Thus far, in my thinking I have not been able to identify this purpose further, but I do feel that it is enormous and very elusive to the understanding capacity of man.

Somehow, I feel satisfied to leave it at this point unanswered. That there is purpose in the direction under which I work has become more and more evident to me through my thesis work. At first it was vague but now the feeling is quite strong. Without purpose there can be no substantial values in life. I must be aware of values at all times or life is not worth living. A seed, with proper care, will flower instead of rot. This is evidence enough for me to presume that an unseen power has directed that it advance with purpose rather than remain static or recede. My respect for this being I must now recognize as nothing less than a religion. When I refer to god I refer to the being in the universe. Why I paint the way I do has a lot to do with how I view my god at different emotional times.

A criteria for framing. Painting, especially in the casein medium offers such wide ranges in color and textures it is hardly fair to say that it has, like all painting mediums, as far as I am concerned, one short-coming. Except for fresco or mural painting, a painter's medium does not afford enough pleasure in physical exercise to suit me. My hands call for more activity. Sculpture is the obvious answer, so, in my work I have satisfied my need for physical activity by bringing an aspect of sculpture to meet the painting in the form of a craft; frame making. In approaching the subject of the frame I have drawn from the major art of sculpture those elements which I think bind man so closely to the form in the round. I have incorporated the appeal to the sense of touch in many cases and also taken advantage of the organic quality of good sculpture to emphasize the relation of the organism, man, to his creative product.

My frames have been inspired most directly by the sculpture of Henry Moore, John Flanagan, and Alexander Calder. I might also add that these artists have influenced my painting and my philosophy considerably. The findings of these artists seem to put into tangible forms what Bergson called "élan vital."

My pictures are framed with two types of basic designs. The first carries with it the feeling for an enclosure, a certain solidness prevailing. The second, is conceived as a kind of suspended web, light and open in feeling and suggesting airy tensions which circumscribe the picture plane.

I have become concerned with the expression of concavity dominating my frames rather than convexity. I am by nature opposed to the convex picture frame but this feeling is not strong enough for me to rule against its use. In a convex there is an intuited expulsion which is out of keeping with the basic requirement of any frame--the frame is a container for the picture. The concave is a natural dwelling. With a good frame the painter can give his painting a home in the world. The setting of a painting exerts a definite influence on the painting which is often underestimated. Picture environment includes all conditions surrounding the picture: the frame, the wall, the room size, the lighting, and the temperature. In other words, the comfort of the person looking at the picture should be considered. When the environment is good the painting takes on more meaning. An interesting study on the psychology of this matter has been conducted by Robert Ogden of Cornell University. He has this to say concerning the picture environment: "A work of creative art is an objective form which incorporates the 'figure-ground' pattern of the artist's mode of apprehension."

"As a 'sense-perception,' both the figure of behavior (work of art) and its context or 'ground' are involved. While the 'ground' is ordinarily neglected in the perception, it is by no means negligible; for it includes both the postural setting of the perceptual act and the surrounding environment in which the object of the act--the situation of the response--occurs. Every work of art is a figure-ground pattern. The music-hall, the theatre, the picture frame, the pedestal, the observer's posture, his whole physiological state at the moment, and his mental readiness for the work he is trying to appreciate--all these 'grounds' play important parts in determining the contours of any artistic pattern."²

The spirit identified on the picture plane must dominate the whole setting and the frame is the most important factor in the setting.

My study of framing has led to some personal conclusions on which I feel justified to generalize. The creative frame, while being an almost unlimited thing is held within a certain restraint by two purposes: first, it must function as a container; and, second, it must be subordinated to the painting. Beyond these two restrictions I can see no reasons for limiting the potential of framing. I find that I cannot paint without considering the conclusion of the picture in a frame.

As I suggested at the start, a stream of unity would prevail through all my work, relating each picture to an underlying conception. This I am now prepared to explain more fully. In the first place, I believe that any worthwhile collection of an individual's work done with a basic conception should reflect as a whole, that same basic conception.

² Robert Morris Ogden, The Psychology of Art (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1938), p. 19.

The most perceptible unity of my project is the lack of symmetry in the framing. With the possible exception of the Community picture my paintings are dominated by the feeling of concavity. Another obvious similarity is provided by the casein medium. Its textures and vividness of color bring these pictures into a unit. Above all, of course, is the subject matter which is by nature a living unit. It is as if each of these pictures is telling a slightly different story about nature and about me.

Having thus described my philosophy and work as a whole, I shall now try to put down the particular motivations involved in each of my paintings and to make comments to show how these paintings fit into my philosophy.

PART III

AN EXPLANATION OF THESIS PAINTINGS AND DRAWINGS

The Amoeba. As I made sketches for The Amoeba, considering as I drew that it was a constantly changing form, I became enthralled with the idea of an organism being in such a rapid state of flux. I speculated that this organism could serve to personify Bergson's description of the flux of the real. I was so near to this small being with its rapidly changing design I could almost hear it sing. I knew that any graphic interpretation of this thing had to embody a central theme of vigorous movement. For a time I seriously considered the subject as a natural form for a mobile sculpture. The line and colors of my Amoeba had to make a living thing out of what we refer to as change. I felt compelled to paint the Amoeba red; a red like moving blood. The surrounding for this organism is another abstraction. I imagined the Amoeba being held in the hollow of a hand. The frame, then, had to be warm and concave with no sharp angles. What I did was to set a stage for the Amoeba to dance. To further imply change, I constructed the frame so that it can be hung from any of its four sides and I expect to turn it often on the wall. Unlike the sleeping nature of a seed, my Amoeba is free from obligation to gravity.

Family Group. This painting is an analogy of two institutions: the human family group and a family in the plant world. It is a simple description of green peas in a pod. Being almost monochromatically green, I have

established immediately its identity to the vegetable. Its shape and texture show more rearrangement than abstraction toward my interpretation of the object. I also identify the green pea with the seed and, therefore, have put into the picture the quietness and conformity which is my understanding of a seed. The seed has an essential duty to the earth. It is obligated to gravity and to the sun and so its life is one of duty with promise. The frame for Family Group is, simply, a configuration of the pea pod.

Universal Cell. When I look at a night sky with its many stars I get a clear picture of the relation of the human being to the universe. I realize the insignificance of the material things and the importance of those things we know as spiritual. Coupled with this thought is the conception of the universe as a cell, a viewpoint easily arrived at by scientific comparisons. Who knows but that all bodies are but systems of cells? From a very elementary understanding of the theories of Albert Einstein I can see why the universe must be limited; it is more beautiful that way! From these thoughts I came to paint the Universal Cell. In it I have used physical tensions of wire to span the void in order to accentuate the vastness of this thing we call the universe. The outer part of the frame serves to show that the universe, with all its space, is limited.

Community. The Community describes the basic tendency in all like things to reside in groups rather than reside separately. The attraction of the male and female and the security of living together with like species are evident in many kinds of cells, large and small. I like to think of this painting as a city or other social organization and in it I have tried to express the individuality of each member of the community and

his varying degree of responsibility to the whole. I have united them by texture and shape, and individualized each by color and position.

The outside shape of these cells acts as the frame and, to me, is sufficient to contain the whole. The spike-like protrusions on the two sides were called for to show the influence exerted by any such group. Group influences are powerful and the color and shape of the points express this power.

Boundaries. The web-like painting that I have named Boundaries is an abstraction from a microscopic photograph. The mystery of structure and union in living organisms is what I have tried to expand upon. Violets and blues predominate because those colors are, for me, the colors of mystery. This painting symbolizes what is unknowable to me about the universal origin and its future. The frame for Boundaries is, again, of the open type making use of inclosed space. It is a simple extension of the web, ending in another union at its rim. In this painting I have departed completely from any reference to symmetry of picture or frame.

Ancestors. The painting Ancestors resulted from a consideration of the beginning of the life of man. The forms are inspirations from organisms as seen through the microscope. This is my image for an interval in the minute stirrings in the beginning. The colors were selected for the sheer love of those colors working in harmony. The frame is pure abstraction. It is derived from no particular natural source and becomes what we speak of as free form.

Cocoon. The Cocoon painting was inspired by both the inward and outward beauty of a cocoon. The cocoon is a kind of seed for an organic type

of life and as such must express the quietness of an enclosed form. The colors are subtle and quiet with green suggesting fertility and brown, an earth color, indicating it is an earth form. The yellow spot is the pulsating movement which goes on inside the cocoon during the metamorphic period.

Primeval Landscape. The painting which I call Primeval Landscape is my image for the environment which awaited the coming of life on our planet. This painting was quite an experiment for me and will no doubt cause some controversy. The starting point for it has been mentioned but the formal construction is based on the horizontal or the feeling of a horizon. It was necessary that I construct the painting surface and its frame before I could actually paint the compositional forms. For this painting I used enamel paints for the advantages of their reflecting qualities. On the under side of the raised plane I used red enamel which reflects against the shiny grey background board which, in turn, completes the frame. A physical hole in the same raised surface admits some direct light for better reflection. I feel that the reflecting warm glow has a certain beauty about it that is unseen in direct color. During its construction I became so fascinated by its three dimensionality that I began to feel like I have felt at times when working on sculpture. The painting carries through my original concept very well and while I am satisfied with its creation I am a little uneasy about defining its nature. After living with it for a few days I became strongly aware of an absence of pictorial quality or "pure painting" in pictures. I have come to see how a painter of "pure" pictures might challenge this painting on the grounds that it describes a pictorial subject, a landscape, and therefore is subject to the

criteria of the "picture" plane. From this critical standpoint the "picture" plane is destroyed by the existence of a three dimensional hole. The painter, Hans Hofmann, thinking in terms of the picture plane has this to say: "Pictorial space exists two dimensionally. When the two dimensionality of a picture is destroyed, it falls into parts--it creates the effect of naturalistic space. When a picture conveys only naturalistic space, it represents a special case, a portion of what is felt about three-dimensional experience. This expression of the artist's experience is thus incomplete."³

I believe the best way to judge this painting is to concede that its subject is abstracted beyond the restrictions of "pictorial" painting and, therefore, has no obligations to physical two-dimensionality. In short, I would rather that my painting be looked upon as a "thing" and judged from there. I realize that I have taken this painting to the outermost limits of a medium--almost to the point of polychrome sculpture. If I have violated my medium I am sure it will show up in time, and if not, the whole experience has been extremely important as a step in my development.

Marine Being. In the Marine Being I have imagined a native from the depths of the sea. I like to think of that part of the oceans which are unknown to man because it is one of the few places on this earth where the imagination may go undisturbed by facts. Along the unexplored ocean bottoms there are probably lives, the forms of which might well be stranger than fiction. To suggest the dynamic fluidness of sea water I took advantage of the grain texture in a particularly beautiful piece of wood. The marine

³ Hans Hofmann, Search For The Real (Andover, Massachusetts: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1948), p. 49.

form itself is really three dimensional, rising from the background in high relief. In this painting there is absolutely no restriction to a "picture" surface such as I mentioned in the Primeval Landscape. This piece of work could logically be criticized from the viewpoint of relief sculpture. The frame for Marine Being carries with it the feeling of worn shells and bones which I have seen and touched on the beach. Marine Being illustrates most accurately my belief that the frame is a part of the over-all design conception. Surely, this painting could not live apart from its frame.

Bloom. The painting Bloom is my expression of what we feel is the fullest point in the development of a flower. We notice that the petals of blossoms generally radiate in a symmetrical pattern from a base point. Some type of symmetry can usually be found in all floral forms which would seem to make symmetry a universal characteristic of floral forms. It is true that a very broad symmetry does exist, but on closer inspection I find that slight differentiations in color, texture, and size are always present in plants. These subtle differences characterize and give individuality. My painting is an attempt to show the beauty that can be found in symmetry which is freed from rigidity.

Drawings. My drawings are selections from numerous sketches. I have used the drawing as an exercise in support of my paintings. I do not think explanations for them are necessary beyond mentioning that I have tried to mat them in such a way as to relate them to my painting and framing.

PART IV

CONCLUSIONS

Upon completion of this thesis I feel that I have sought out and touched something of the essence-stuff of which I myself am made. There is no "proof" in my work and I love it. The "proof" for me has come to mean a cold-blooded scientific finale. My discoveries have been much greater than anticipated. What I have found is so important that without it my devotion to nature would revert to a whimsical pantheism and an idle diversion.

"Works of art are man's revelation of nature's contents. He who reveals prophecies. We know nature better through art. Science proves to the mind art reveals the heart."⁴

I am convinced that art is in need of absolutely nothing except honest expression. Art has never changed: only the approaches to it have changed and varied and as we go along new art media are developed.

Like a growing seed my search grew. I know now that it has no end and that the climaxes which tantalize are those first few moments at the beginning of a painting. Completing a painting is a secondary satisfaction like closing my eyes and going to sleep when I am tired.

⁴ Max Weber, Max Weber (New York: American Artists Group, Inc., 1945).

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